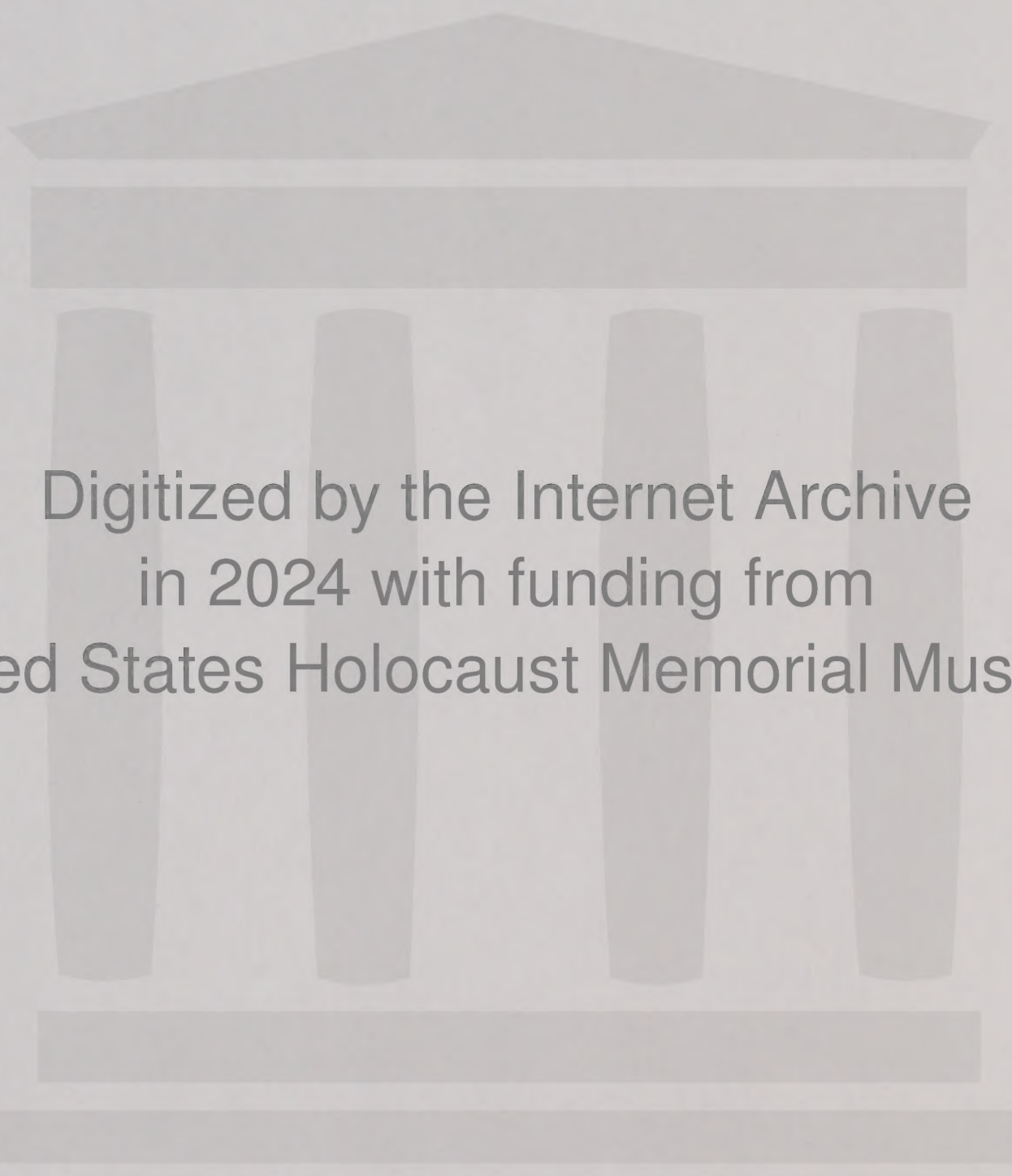




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Dr. SALOMEA KAPE
30 Paerdegat 9th Street
Brooklyn, NY 11236
TEL (718) 763-9088
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Freda and other friends

"Hi, Sally," the voice in the receiver was hollow and without waiting for a sign of acknowledgement, continued, "I hope it's not too late," Sally slowly lifted her head full of undefined dreams. The clock showed ten past midnight. The voice lost the dimness and resumed, "I can't sleep. My life is parading in front of me and you're a part of the parade. To go through the night is an agonizing experience. It's as if the Dibbuk of my mother entered my body. Do you hear me?"

Sally didn't answer waiting with closed eyes for a short pause to say unkindly, "Shut-up, Freda. I have to take care of an office full of patients at eight o'clock in the morning and I need my sleep."

But the voice proceeded, ". I would like to visit you, oh yes, I'll take short vacation..."

The one-way conversation came to an abrupt end when the thought of the costly long distance call, Warsaw-Lodz, struck the post-midnight caller. The desired silence reigned on the wire, but Sally was already fully awake, and she recoiled from the idea of having Freda as a guest.

"Sally," she said to herself, "Freda from a safe distance is hard to digest. As a guest she'll be even less appetizing. I'm sentenced for life with that bizarre, nightmarish friendship, and there's no escape from her for I'll die slowly inside me tormented by guilt."

It started in school, in Lodz, a few years before the war. Freda was the best

student in the class. She excelled in every subject. Sally couldn't keep up with her and even a tutor didn't help. Sally in her exhausting efforts of matching Freda studied day and night learning by heart whole passages from the textbooks with not much success. The teacher told her mother, "Sally has a photographic memory, but she has learned, figuratively speaking, to dance only in one direction. She's a studious child, but she pushes too hard."

Sally visited Freda a few times. The three-story building was located in the poorest section of Lodz, called Baluty. Sally climbed the steep, unlit stairs and found Freda's apartment at the far end of a dirty and smelly hallway. .

The family of four lived in a single, large room. One window occupied almost the whole wall with a full view of the market where the poorest of Baluty bought old beds with hidden generations of bedbugs. Used mattresses showing a wide range of pastel-yellow to dark- brown stains of various sizes and a battery of chairs with missing legs and tables without tops waited for the customers. The furniture stood like an army of war invalids after a major battle. The noise of loud bargaining and the heavy odor of horses' urine and droppings filtered to the tenement.

Freda's mother, a thin and tall woman with a pale, ascetic face of a Catholic saint, was in constant motion cleaning invisible dust from an old credenza and within a minute she was on her knees scrubbing the spotless, wooden, worn floor at the same time watching the soup on the coal stove. She rose from the floor, stirred the soup and nervously paced the room without saying a word. Freda's father was absorbed with the newspaper and jumped like a mechanical doll from one chair to another as he allowed his wife to mop the floor.

His presence at home in the middle of the day surprised Sally but she learned later, that he was between jobs.

" May I go out with Sally, Ma?" Freda asked in a timid voice.

"What?!" The mother was screaming and Sally trembled for she didn't expect

the high-pitched shriek to come from that tight-lipped mouth.

“Did you do your homework? What about the book you took from the library? Ohrstein knows her way home.”

She called Sally by her last name. First names she saved for her children, but she never used the diminutive form. It was always Freda and Alexander, not Fredka or Olek. The father threw a tired look at Freda, shrugged his shoulders and went back to reading. Freda showed Sally the door with her eyes.

Sally went home and said, “Ma, transfer me to another school. I cannot be the first student in class.”

“ You’re doing fine in school. There’s no need for change. ”

The same night Sally was feverish, talked incoherently and a doctor was called. He made her say “ah”, listened to her lungs, looked into her ears, palpated her soft belly but couldn’t find the source of the low grade fever. He was perplexed by the strange behavior of this rather quiet girl he had known since early childhood. He ordered several tests and after a consultation with a psychiatrist concluded that the mysterious illness is due to pubertal hormonal imbalance, but he wasn’t sure of the diagnosis. Sally stayed at home two months simulating with great success fits of strange behavior and getting some harmless medications. She had plenty of time to read many books of her own choice. She realized that she cannot compete with Freda and her mother and she may as well stay home.

Freda brilliantly passed every single test and received a full scholarship for further study in the gymnasium. When Sally went back to school Freda was already gone and Sally was the unbeatable star in the class. With Freda’s departure, the thrill of competition was gone and so was the tension, but Sally couldn’t get rid of the bad habit of biting her fingernails. She met Freda a few times in the street and listened with little interest to her long list of achievements in the gymnasium.

Their ways crossed again during the war in the ghetto school, but by then Sally’s

ambition to be the best student vanished. She went to see Freda and the room seemed to grow in size and in silence. The shiny credenza and a few chairs were missing for they had lit the coal stove during the winter. The barefoot, unkempt mother sat rigidly on a stool by the big window looking with unseeing and unblinking eyes at the street below. The market was an empty and lifeless space.

Sally said “Good day-*dzien dobry*,” but the mother didn’t move nor did she acknowledge Sally’s presence with a single gesture for she was in her private universe liberated from the constraints of the ghetto life and set free in her madness. She triggered fear in Sally. She wasn’t scared of typhoid or tuberculosis, the rampant diseases in the ghetto, but mental sickness horrified her, and she realized that she’d never again visit Freda. Freda had to deal with her mother alone. Her father had died and her little brother never left the room. Sally knew what she could offer. **NOTHING.**

After the war Freda came back to Lodz from the concentration camps and lived in a newly formed kibbutz. The kibbutz provided room and board to many homeless, lonely, young Jews returning from the death camps as they waited for the right time to leave Poland and start a long journey of illegally entering Palestine.

Freda spent a month or two in the kibbutz listening to the lectures, participating in discussions, singing patriotic songs and she regained a healthy look on the food from the communal kitchen.

A day before the departure for Palestine, Freda disappeared from the kibbutz and moved in with her cousin.

“Sally, please understand,” she explained, “I’m not a Zionist. I must go back to school, and only in Poland I can get a free education. Studying is the only thing I’ve done all my life and I’m not interested in anything else. I had figured it out, I’ll find a job and I’ll go to school at night.”

“But you took somebody’s place in the kibbutz.” Sally reminded her.

“So what?” Freda snapped at her. “I needed a shelter. You’re the last person

to judge me. You, unlike me, survived with your parents and you never had to worry where to spend the night or how to obtain the next meal.” The statement delivered in an icy tone closed the discussion. Sally always felt an odd embarrassment at her “chosen” status of having a mother and a father.

Freda’s cousin came to Lodz with her twelve years old son after five years of hiding in Warsaw, on the Aryan side. The boy couldn’t admit that he was Jewish and terror was still present in his blue eyes. He regarded Freda with suspicion and didn’t like her brown hair, dark eyes and he always found a slight intonation in her Polish. She had to hide in the kitchen when his friends visited him and his mother assumed the role of a maid. He didn’t trust her Slavic appearance, and his Polish friends “sniffed” a Jew from a distance. Freda had strict orders never to invite her Jewish friends and the two women followed his dictates.

Freda jokingly told stories of the boy’s paranoid fixation, but she seemed not to care about it, for she was too busy with her job and school.

She blossomed in the summer of 1946. Her straight chestnut hair cascading down her shoulders added a sparkle to her dark- brown eyes. The healthy, golden tan, the red lips and white teeth formed an attractive mix of colors, which masked some irregularities of her face. Nothing remained of the little mouse in school or the ugly, painfully thin girl in the ghetto.

The gossipy rumors in Lodz informed the interested as well as the uninterested parties that Freda had a lover. Her exploits became a fodder for tales among the jealous young men.

Mark complained. “Sally, I don’t understand why she chose this old guy with a wild reputation over me. I’m her age, we attend the same school, and without false modesty, I’m better looking. I like her, but she doesn’t see me.”

Sally went to see Freda while the “Aryan” boy was on vacation. In the kitchen Freda prepared a meal with the profound concentration of a lab researcher on the

verge of a cosmic discovery. Sally was totally unprepared for the new, happy image of Freda.

“Dear, dear Sally don’t look at me with those surprised eyes. I’m cooking a dinner for a good friend who should be here soon. No, nothing serious, just a friend.” She responded to an unasked question with a lie, but her face, radiant eyes, the new dress she wore for that occasion, said something else.

“ Oh, well. My Ma taught me a few things and what I remember most is that no one likes to be disturbed at meals or love and in your case, Freda, it’s both. Servus.” Sally said while Freda put finishing touches on the tastefully prepared table.

In the narrow and dark staircase Sally passed a tall, handsome man, a breath whistling in his chest. The tom-tom in Lodz had beaten its gossipy rhythms and Sally was well informed of his rich past, of a series of girlfriends and three matrimonial escapades. The wheezy man brought from a Russian “lager” the asthmatic breathing, and a Cossack girl who, as the vicious tongues told Sally, entertained his friends in a nightgown she took erroneously for an evening gown.

Sally heard the opening of the door and him saying breathlessly, “*Fredzia, Fredka.*” She felt a sort of happiness for her friend who had never been called so tenderly before.

It was a warm summer and Freda was seen at the swimming pool or in the Lagiewnicki Forest always with the tall man who was at the unspeakable old age of the late thirties. She hadn’t noticed her friends when she was with him nor did she return their greetings. Mark complained, “She’s seeing everything but recognizing nobody.” The Cossack girl was shipped to Ciechocinek to smell the iodine vapors in the air and to take mineral-baths for which the health resort was famous.

But before the summer was over, the third wife came from Australia claiming her possession. He obediently returned to his wife who seemed to be a few years older, but she explained that the Australian sun had aged her skin. She brought the security

of a foreign passport, Australian dollars and a marriage certificate.

Freda and the Russian girl drifted away leaving the marital space for the triumphant, albeit aged by the sun wife.

Lodz, or rather a very small particle of Lodz was boiling with news. Freda had made more than a few enemies acting as a blind-deaf person while she was with her lover. Her nosy friends never, never thought that the affair would last long and the two months of the short Polish summer were a long enough romance for the Lodzer Casanova.

Sally went to see Freda to tell her. "Whatever happened, everything will eventually be O.K."

The boy almost slammed the door in her face. "She doesn't live here anymore," he said in his falsetto voice with such ferocity that Sally jumped back. "Jesus," he added, "we can't get rid of you people."

Sally couldn't look at the blond boy in his short pants and brown shirt. It was as if she saw Nazi regalia and two swastikas in his hostile eyes. She wanted to punch him hard, right between his permafrost Nazi eyes, straight in the nose, but she couldn't even lift her finger, for she had never hit anybody. Instead she said in a spiteful whisper loud enough to be heard down the hall, "You scum, you dreck, you survived. You should have died gassed in Treblinka, you, you" she was searching for a torrent of invectives, but what could be worse than the poisonous words she had already spoken. She saw his mother's face emerging from the kitchen and she walked away, no, she ran away.

Sally found Freda months later in a dormitory built for young people who didn't have a home. Her colors had faded away in the pale sun of the early winter and she adopted a nervous smile, a needling type of conversation, I-know-best attitude and a communist ideology. She listened to Sally with a critical eye of an ideological zealot and delivered a quick statement.

"You're a typical product of your bourgeois origin."

Some months later Freda categorized her as *Lumpen-Proletariat*, and when Sally understood the '*Lumpen*' she never forgave the insult. Oh, Freda was a friend with claws, however at that time she didn't know what the "Lumpen" meant either. It had a derogatory, insulting German bark and she snapped it at Sally's face. Sally with the scared and guilty eyes was an easy and sensitive target.

Frieda became an ideological terrorist shouting wooden slogans, and in her hand-me-downs dresses she looked shabby, colorless, drained of joy of life. Her severe hairdo and no-nonsense face made her look older than her twenty-one years. Freda had garnered a big amount of resentment for both her needling and the ideological vigor. For her ability to cling and to hurt she earned a nickname "Freda, the Bedbug." She was a person people loved to hate and she was overflowing with hostility too. Sally suffered patiently the overdose of a malicious Freda.

When Sally's name didn't appear on the acceptance list to the Medical School she confronted Freda. "Where's your justice? I've the best grades. It must have been my Jewish name the Board of Examiners didn't like."

"Let me check it. I'll see what I can do." Freda said calmly. "One should bang one's fist harder on the table if injustice is done." Two weeks later Sally received an admission letter.

Freda introduced Sally to her friends, Ruth and Alex, both survived Lodz – Ghetto, Auschwitz, death camps, death marches, they met in Germany after the war, fell in love, returned to Lodz and lived together. Their small apartment was always full of young people discussing politics, books, school, and their future in post-war Poland. They were serious people with serious faces, homeless and lonely with fresh memories of ghettos and concentration camps. Alex often patted a gun visible in his pocket as if it was a head of an untamed beast. The post-war years were still perilous for Jews and Alex got the gun for his own protection from anti-Semitic Polish groups still active in post-war Poland.

There was always a sandwich for a hungry fellow, a cup of cheap chicory coffee to stimulate the nightly conversation and a cot with a blanket for a visitor without a place to sleep. Ruth took Freda under her wing and loathed her nickname.

“ Don’t dare to call her a ‘Bedbug’.” Ruth scolded Eva. “Freda shared her bread with me in the concentration camp. She didn’t utter a sound when she was beaten up by a Kapo and was bleeding from every pore of her body. She was a personification of endurance, courage and solidarity and she was my inspiration and support in camp. Tell me, how many of you have taken care of a mentally sick mother in the ghetto? None. Listen everyone, in my house she’s Fredka.”

Eva had the nerve to say, “Freda’s goodness is so deeply buried no one has seen it in a long time. I don’t care if she was good or bad in camp. Now she’s consuming her enemies for breakfast and her best friends for lunch. She’s not a bedbug, she’s a cannibal.”

“You are not the best judge of people. Freda helped her friend to be admitted to Medical School and cornered the Admitting Board into a situation where they were forced to confront their anti-Semitism. They took away her stipend for almost a year. ” Ruth’s quiet, handsome face was agitated, her dark eyes narrowed and her hands trembled. “Fredka’s my friend and I don’t tolerate insulting nicknames. She’s a firm believer in Communism but she’s not a *Koniunktur-Schweine*- an opportunity swine, like others.”

Ruth used German to define lowest human behavior as if Polish was a language too noble or sacred to express contempt.

Everyone in the room knew that it was Eva who earned the Germanic epithet for she became a Party member for a flat, a monthly stipend and an admission to the University. Sally wore a shocking expression on her face and Eva silently stared at her shoes and left the room.

Eva was a tall, slim, attractive girl with smiling eyes and she had a certain

sensual quality that enlivened the nightly discussions. Alex's eyes followed her and she was always a bit too close to him, almost touching the gun bulging from his pocket.

Sally remarked to Freda, "Eva is a constant guest in their house and she's flirting with Alex, but it's more than flirting. He behaves like a sexually charged young bull. Do you see it? Should we talk to Ruth?"

"No, no and again no. You're reading too many cheap romances. Alex's too serious "to flirt" and he has high moral standards. It's degrading even to mention Eva as Ruth's competitor." Freda answered, her lips curled with disgust.

"In the department of love everything is possible and in my cheap books a high level of male hormones towers over highest standards."

Within a month Alex left Ruth for the girl with the seductive eyes. He came back after a couple of weeks, but Ruth didn't accept his explanation and showed him the door.

"It was a mistake, Ruth. Forgive me." He begged and later cried. He was only nineteen years old, two years younger than Ruth. "I can't go on without you."

She stubbornly refused reconciliation. Alex wanted only to scare her, and he didn't aim to kill himself but it was the first time he fired a gun and the bullet went straight through his heart. Ambulance took the body to the hospital and after he was pronounced dead, Ruth jumped from the hospital window and died instantly on the wet, slippery, cobblestone paved street of Lodz.

Sally couldn't find Freda among the mourners at the cemetery, but it was too cold and too painful to think. She stared at the nearby tomb of a black British actor who came to Lodz a half century before to play Othello. As the story went he was dying of pneumonia in the hotel room and while shivering from cold and fever he was more scared of being buried in this cold and strange land than of the death itself.

Sally felt as if Shakespeare plays came to life in the Lodz cemetery : Othello and Romeo and Juliet but she had to stop inventing a theater at the cemetery for she now

clearly understood that the war is not over for people like her in Poland.

Sally met Eva forty-two years later in another country. The passing years had erased the faces of the young lovers from her memory.

A youthful looking Eva with a glowing pink, smooth skin, elegantly coiffured and dressed stood in the corner, her back straight as an arrow, her figure slim and athletic. A wrinkled like a prune and overweight Sally approached her with caution. The bejeweled Eva smelled of good perfume and of money from the large lump-sum divorce settlements from her two husbands. Even now, in her middle sixties she had a well-off lover.

"Here're my universities," she said showing the pictures of her daughter and grandchildren. At that moment Sally heard herself saying " Schweine, Schweine, swine, swine" and without excuse she left the bewildered Eva.

Sally couldn't locate Freda, and in truth, she didn't look for her. She had heard that Freda moved to Warsaw, married a fellow-student and graduated from the University with a degree in physics. Sally visited her a few years later. The couple occupied a tiny flat in a Warsaw City project. The flat was ultra-Spartan and smaller than Freda's prewar room in Lodz.

" Why aren't you in research? " Sally asked

" I'm not a Madam Curie. There are many more talented people and I am one of many mediocre physicists. Here is my daughter, Felicia, a bright and intelligent child " Freda presented her baby-daughter and it was always Felicia although the name seemed to be too long for the tiny child. But the fuel of her maternal instincts seemed to be diluted, watery, and on the spur of moment she could leave the child under the care of her husband Abe, whose name she changed to Anthony. Anthony looked more like

Abraham and sometimes forgot to react to the sound of his new name.

If only Sally could have told her, "Please call your daughter Fela, Felunia, not Felicia. Say Tony, not Anthony." Well, no matter, it wouldn't have changed Freda.

Sally asked with trepidation. "We could talk about it calmly for it happened four years ago. Why you didn't come to the cemetery?"

Freda goodnaturedly took the unexpected turn in the conversation.

"I stayed with Ruth, when Alex left for..." She didn't remember or didn't want to pronounce her name, "I was the worse advisor a friend could have had for I reinforced all the negative feelings she had against him and I encouraged her not to accept him back. To be firm, noble, unbending. I was so racked by guilt for the tragedy that I had to leave Lodz. Besides, I couldn't breathe the same air as..." the name was still unspeakable.

"I moved to Warsaw and all my emotions surfaced. I was as good as dead, like my mother during the war. Abe saved me; he was with me day and night."

"Oh, Freda. You couldn't prevent the events because they ran their own course. Alex didn't want to kill himself. Why not to blame the racial hatred still present in our country after the war which forced him to have a gun? Without the gun it would have been only a lovers' quarrel."

"Ruth was my only friend and I lost in my pseudo-righteousness the one friend I'd had. Why you didn't protect me from myself?"

Sally laughed hard at the question.

"I was afraid of you, Freda, and I couldn't talk to you because of the guilt complex you built in me for years. I was also blinded by your superbly functioning mind since childhood. Besides, when did you ask of my support or opinion? Never."

"Sally, the notion of me as a genius you planted in your mind and it made you crazy in school. I was a creation of my mother who squeezed every cell in my brain she could to create a wonderchild. I was your gold standard, but you wanted be "platinum."

Unfortunately the abilities weren't there, not in me and not in you. Look at our mediocre carriers. My shadow hung over you and stimulated you, an average child with enormous ambitions to be grander, not better. You invented me and you needed me more than I ever needed you."

Sally looked at the clock again and relieved the white-knuckled grip on the receiver. "God, I need a few hours sleep." but with her orderly doctor's mind she made a note, "To call Freda the first thing in the morning. Maybe it's not too late to become a friend I have never been."

But she never called. Because Sally was genuine and natural.
A genuine and natural coward.

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